

FEI Interview

Beating Competition Nerves



Q What are some of the more common reasons for show nerves?

- You want to perform as well at a show as you know you can at home, but you can't "make" that happen (cannot control the outcome).
- You know "everyone" is watching and there are no "do-overs."
- The jumps *always* look three inches higher and twelve inches wider than they do at home(!).
- You feel that how well you do at the show will reflect your judgment about your choice of trainer and/or horse, so you feel you have a lot riding on it.

Q How can a rider identify what it is about shows that makes them nervous (e.g. failure to perform, fear of falling off)?

George Morris makes this exact distinction between "mental fear" and "physical fear." In my experience, most riders are usually able to identify what's making them nervous. They'll say to me, "I'm worried about making a mistake," and then I'll ask, "What kind of mistake?" At that point they'll say, "Like, with my distances," or "My trainer gets really mad if I have even a quarter time fault." Other riders will say, "I'm just worried that I'm going to do something to ruin my new horse," or "Ever

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since we crashed at the last show I haven't been able to ride forward to the jumps..." Yet others will say, "I want to do well in front of my old trainer, who's going to be at this show." Riders typically know what's making them nervous—they just don't know what to do about it.

Q Once a rider knows what the basis of their fear is, are there specific coping mechanisms that they can use? Do these mechanisms depend on the root of the anxiousness?

I do address anxieties about performance differently than I do anxieties about safety.

Anxieties about performance are difficult to control. When you go to man-handle them with such strategies as thought stopping, or to counter them with relaxation techniques, they almost always become a bigger, and more elusive, monster. You end up feeling as if you're playing a never-ending game of Whack-A-Mole.

This is why I approach this type of problem from a different angle than do many other sport psychologists. Rather than setting up the rider's anxiety as this thing to be "beaten" or abolished, I help the rider identify the specific ways in which her anxiety compromises her riding, e.g., it makes her under-ride, so she second guesses herself or becomes too passive, or she over-rides, kicking and pulling and become erratic with her aids. That allows us to isolate and target adjustments over which she has a

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greater measure of control than she does over making her body ‘relax.’ It’s a whole lot easier to train yourself to generate a mind set of “Execute!” or “Be tactful!” as you walk into the ring than it is to make your self relax. My approach is about accepting what is really a natural response of the human mind and body to a stressful situation, and working respectfully alongside it. It is always tailored to the individual’s personality and style of thinking, and is effective very quickly.

Anxieties about safety need to be taken at face value—that is, until these anxieties dissipate, a rider will not be able to perform even close to her best. While there are few changes you can make to the environment that will attenuate show nerves, there *are* changes in a rider’s program you can make that will address riding fears and, in fact, until they are addressed, the problem will remain. You cannot—and should not—try to arm wrestle safety fears to the ground, no matter how “irrational” or “unfounded” someone (a trainer, spouse, barn mate) thinks they are. Once a rider is anxious about getting hurt or being run off with, everything about that person’s riding changes, and they are no longer in a position to confidently and effectively address the problems at hand. Even if there are no “real” problems, and it’s believed the problem is all “in the rider’s head,” that rider’s experience must be respected. My approach is to help riders identify the level or parameters of riding at which they would feel entirely comfortable riding their horse, and start back from there. Maybe it’s dropping down a level or two, maybe it’s riding only in the indoor, maybe it’s riding only after someone else has gotten on their horse first—it doesn’t matter. Trying to hurry a rider back to where they were as recently as a week ago won’t work if that rider isn’t feeling the

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way she did a week ago. It's no more beneficial to rush riders back than it is to rush our horses back after a loss of confidence. Don't we deserve at least as thoughtful a program as we give our horses?

And the anxiety so many rider's have about ruining their horse? The only way to deal with this tiger is to recognize that worrying about ruining your horse means you're going to be more tentative in everything you do with him. We know that tentativeness + riding is not a good combination; in fact, that's *precisely* the thing that enables the mistakes that can ruin a horse. But since you cannot make yourself *not* worry about ruining your horse, the best way out of this conundrum is to *actually give yourself permission to ruin him* while trusting that once you've liberated yourself from the paralyzing anxiety of making mistakes, you'll ride more naturally and more effectively, thus *decreasing* the chances that you would ever actually ruin him. Such are the paradoxes of riding horses!

Q Do you advocate using any medicine to help initially?

- I have no objection to medication but have not had occasion to recommend it for the riders I see. In fact, quite a few are already on some type of SSRI that takes the edge off of their anxiety.

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Q What would your advice be to people who are confident at home but not at shows? It seems strange that someone could jump 1.20m at home comfortably but be too nervous to jump 80cm at a show - in that case, surely lack of confidence in riding ability or the horse's ability isn't the problem?

I actually don't find it odd at all. It's unlikely that the problem is a lack of confidence in their riding ability or the horse's ability; short of a bad ride or incident those things don't deconstruct that quickly. Here are some alternative ideas:

- *Because* they are jumping 1.20m at home, they might feel extra pressure to do especially well at a show jumping .80 since, after all, it's a much lower (and therefore easier) height.
- Many riders who trust their eye at home worry about being accurate at shows, no matter what the height of the fences. So their loss of confidence may be more about not being able to depend on their accuracy when it really counts.
- And for some riders, horse shows just make them really nervous. They could be doing the itty bittys, and they'd be nervous! It's away from home, people are watching, they have to memorize courses, remember to wait for the buzzer, know where the start and finish lines are... it's easy for the experienced show rider to forget all the details involved that they've learned to navigate automatically.

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Q How can treatment with a sports psychologists help to improve your confidence at shows and banish nerves?

There are several ways that a sports psychologist can help:

- By normalizing the anxiety for someone who thinks there is something wrong with them because they can't "conquer" their show nerves. Recognizing that show nerves are "the price of doing business," so to speak, can remove the negative self-talk (*If I'm this nervous it must be because I'm a "chicken" or a "baby."*) and allow a rider to think of herself in more positive terms (*I get anxious because I want to do well. Of course!*) and re-instill a confidence that had been lost.
- By helping riders to identify the specific ways in which their performance anxiety changes their riding, and then helping them to compensate for those changes. Let's say you have a rider who gets nervous about making mistakes and, as a result, becomes indecisive in the show ring. What she needs is a tool to mobilize the decision-making part of her personality—that could be repeating a motto of "Execute!" as she goes into the ring, or recognizing that her horse desperately *needs* her to captain their ship. Committing to making decisions—right or

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wrong—is a whole lot easier and more focused than trying to make yourself “relax,” a vague command to your autonomic nervous system, a system over which you really have no control in the first place. It’s in this way that riders can find themselves riding well *even though* they feel nervous. I don’t ask riders to journal or do homework; they are busy enough. What I’ve found to be more useful is helping riders to have mental tools they can draw on in the moment, for example, while at the in gate, or on the way to their first fence. These tools need to be simple and powerful—capable of evoking certain feelings or attitudes from a rider quickly. This reminds me of my favorite sport psychology story in which an American track and field star, Pat Matzdorf, was bombarded with questions from reporters after winning a major high jump event. “Did you change your training program?” “Do you have different running shoes?” “Nah,” he said, with a chuckle. “I didn’t shave this morning and it just made me feel *mean!*” Brilliant.



By helping riders to take the “fight” out of managing their show nerves. There is no “banishing” of show nerves—it’s part of the horse show experience, and the more you target them as something to get rid of, the bigger a distraction they become. Just like a bully, anxiety is empowered by the strong reactions it draws from people. Nobody likes show nerves—they feel horrible and compromise your riding. But nothing is more frustrating than trying to exert control over something that is not under your control. Better to accept it, and let it drop into

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the background as you turn your attention to factors you can control, e.g., more pace at the outset if under-riding means you ride backwards to the jumps, or thoughts of composure or diplomacy if over-riding makes you a kick and pull and chase-the-distance kind of rider. I like to say that the funny thing about show nerves is that they're only a problem if you think you shouldn't be having them.

Q What are your top 3 tips to help calm show nerves?

1. Accept them as part of the horse show experience. Once you accept them, your attention turns elsewhere and the nerves, now disempowered, move into the background of your thoughts.
2. Think about how your show nerves compromise your riding, and compensate for that. If they make you a more timid rider, focus on becoming “decisive,” on “making it happen.” If they make you too aggressive, focus on the concept of “diplomacy” or “composure” or even “partnership” with your horse, rather than worrying about relaxing.
3. Give yourself a break—managing your performance anxiety is as much a part of becoming a better rider as is developing a deeper seat or a more educated hand. These things take time, and “miles in the saddle.”

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Understand it as a natural response to a competitive situation in which you want to do well but cannot control all that happens. There are a lot of moving parts to this sport; we work hard and we are hungry to succeed. The more we respect that, and respect ourselves, the less vulnerable we are to feelings and thoughts that bubble up and make us question what we're doing at the barn at 4 am drinking cold coffee and eating stale donuts...